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## “IMPUDENT PROVOCATION BY FINNISH WARMONGERS” – THE SHELLING OF MAINILA (1939) IN THE CONTEXT OF SOVIET/RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND INFORMATION WARFARE

### ABSTRACT

The shelling of Mainila in November 1939 was used as a pretext by the Soviet Union to start a war against Finland and is often presented in military history as a classic case of a false-flag operation. This article examines this incident in the context of Soviet propaganda, post-Soviet history politics, and contemporary Russian war propaganda and rhetoric. It argues that the same strategies – blaming others for provocation, “accusation in a mirror”, and systematically emphasizing one’s innocence – applied by Soviet newspapers to their reportage of this “provocation” are applied by Russian propagandists in the contemporary domestic and international media environment.

### KEYWORDS:

Soviet Union, Russia, war, propaganda, political uses of history

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## INTRODUCTION

On 26 November 1939, according to the established view, the Red Army shelled the small border village of Mainila. This false flag operation was the starting point for a war between the Soviet Union and Finland and was also the endpoint in the longer process of the former putting pressure on the latter, which was trying to retain its neutrality and integrity in the face of growing international tensions. Before the incident, basing its claims on its need to protect Leningrad, the Soviet Union had tried to persuade Finland to move the border westward, away from Leningrad, as well as to cede certain islands to the Soviet Union and lease Hanko peninsula to be used as a Soviet naval base. Some land in Eastern Karelia was offered in exchange. These requests were part of demands that were presented to Finland from 1938 onwards and were intended to ensure that this country would not become a bridgehead for hostile acts by Germany, Britain or France towards the Soviet Union. Finland refused the deal. Soon, the Soviet Union declared that a Finnish military provocation had taken place in Mainila, claiming the lives of four men and wounding nine.<sup>1</sup>

Based on this claim, on the same day the foreign minister of the Soviet Union, Viachestlav Molotov, sent a note to Finland's envoy in Moscow, Aarno Yrjö-Koskinen. In this note it was announced that basing troops near Leningrad was a hostile act which had now led to an attack and that the Finnish troops should immediately be withdrawn farther from the border. On 27 November, Yrjö-Koskinen conveyed the Finnish government's reply, which noted that explosions had indeed been reported by the Finnish border guard but that all the Finnish artillery was placed too far from the border for any shots to reach the Soviet Union. Also, it was suggested that the case should be investigated in cooperation between Soviet and Finnish border officials and that all troops, both Finnish and Soviet, should be transferred to an equal distance from the border.<sup>2</sup>

Molotov answered that the reply reflected "the deep hostility of Finnish government towards the Soviet Union" and would inevitably lead to extreme escalation of the tensions between these two countries. Further, the note announced that

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR, 1939. Sentjabr'-dekabr'*, 2 vols (Moskva: Meždunarodnye otnošenija, 1992), II; Carl van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland 1939–40* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 14–24; Robert Edwards, *The Winter War: Russia's Invasion of Finland, 1939–1940* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2008), pp. 76–106; Ohto Manninen, *The Soviet Plans for the North Western Theatre of Operations in 1939–1944* (Helsinki: National Defence College, 2004), pp. 7–11.

<sup>2</sup> Van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland 1939–40*, p. 24. See also Väinö Tanner, *Olin ulkoministerinä talvisodan aikana* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1979), pp. 122–24.

The fact that the Finnish government denies that Finnish troops fired on Soviet troops with artillery fire, causing victims, can only be explained as a means for misleading public opinion and mocking the victims of the attack. Only a lack of a sense of responsibility and a contemptuous attitude towards public opinion can have dictated this attempt to explain this hideous incident as a Soviet artillery drill on the border that was visible to the Finnish troops.<sup>3</sup>

Also, the note concluded that the goal of the Finnish government was to keep Leningrad under threat and that the suggestion of a mutual retreat of troops from the border was unrealistic due to the close proximity of this city.<sup>4</sup> On 29 November, the Soviet Union announced its withdrawal from the nonaggression pact that had been signed in 1932; the next day, Russia invaded Finland and bombed Helsinki without an explicit declaration of war (ultimately, this act led to the expelling of the Soviet Union from the League of Nations). On 1 December, the Soviet Union also announced the foundation of "the People's Revolutionary Government of Finland" as the official socialist government it was having diplomatic relations with. This puppet government was formed of Soviet citizens and leftist "red" Finns who had escaped to the Soviet Union after the Finnish Civil War in 1918.<sup>5</sup>

The war between the Soviet Union and Finland is known as the Winter War and it ended with the Moscow Peace Treaty in March 1940, after a Soviet breakthrough at the Karelian Isthmus. Finland suffered heavy territorial losses that exceeded the Soviet Union's pre-war demands. Nevertheless, Finland's resistance had surprised the Red Army, which also suffered heavy losses.<sup>6</sup> In 1941–44, the hostilities between the Soviet Union and Finland were renewed, with Finland being supported by Germany.

The official Soviet view that Finland had been the aggressor that caused the Winter War did not waver. However, in May 1994, President Boris Yeltsin held a press conference in Moscow together with the President of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari, during which he admitted that

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Tanner, *Olin ulkoministerinä talvisodan aikana*, p. 124. See also 'Telegramma vremennogo poverennogo v delach SSSR v Finlrandii M.G. Judanova v Narodnyj komissariat inostrannych del SSSR, 27 nojabrja 1939', in *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR, 1939*, II, pp. 342–43.

<sup>4</sup> Tanner, *Olin ulkoministerinä talvisodan aikana*, p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> 'Soobščenie ob ustanovlenii diplomaticheskikh otноšenij meždu SSSR i Finljandskoj Demokratičeskoj Respublikoj', 2 dekabrya 1939', in *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR, 1939*, II, p. 355; Edwards, *The Winter War*, pp. 107, 114–16.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, *The Winter War*, pp. 272–82; Pasi Tuunainen, *Finnish Military Effectiveness in the Winter War 1939–1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), *passim*.

the Winter War was a result of Stalin's aggressive politics.<sup>7</sup> The opening of Russian archives during the 1990s had also revealed that detailed plans to attack Finland had been ready by the end of November 1939, and Andrei Zhdanov, according to his notes, had been active in preparing this (also, in 1985, the Russian historian Igor Bunich had interviewed a retired general who said that his group had been testing a new secret projectile in Mainila and had received precise orders regarding where and how to do this; however, as the general had died in 1986, it was not possible to get more detailed information about this after the dissolution of the Soviet Union).<sup>8</sup> Since then, there has been a kind of silent consensus on the matter.

However, quite recently, the issue of the shelling of Mainila has occasionally been brought forward once again, partly due to the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Winter War in 2019. The innocence of Finland in starting the war was questioned in several Russian articles and blogs in the latter half of the 2010s. These texts were authored by individuals, but in some cases they were connected to state authorities.

In this article, I will first examine the reportage of this incident in the contemporary Soviet media and the means used to justify it when describing the "provocation" and the "response" to it amongst the people. I will leave aside the treatment of the incident in the media outside the Soviet Union, as the focus is on how the Soviet audience was persuaded to accept mobilization using the alleged shelling as a *casus belli*.

However, it should be pointed out that the Soviet diplomats kept a watchful eye on how the escalation of the "Finnish question" was represented abroad, with the intention of influencing the issue and reporting the situation to the commissary of foreign affairs. For instance, in this correspondence, the British and American media were reprimanded for their "anti-Soviet" treatment of the event before and especially after the Soviet invasion of Finland as they considered the Soviet government's desire to seize Finnish territory to be the root cause of the events.<sup>9</sup> Also, as part of this contemporary information warfare, Molotov, in his letter to the Secretary-general of the League of Nations, Joseph Avenol, on 4 December 1939,

<sup>7</sup> Despite my efforts, I did not manage to find a report of the press conference. For a secondary reference, see, for instance, Pekka Nevalainen, 'Many Karelias', Virtual Finland, November 2001, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20060814015731/http://newsroom.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=25907>> [accessed 29 August 2022].

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Osto Manninen, *Stalinin kiusa – Himmelin täi. Sota-ajan pieni Suomi maailman silmissä ja arkistojen kätiköissä* (Helsinki: Edita, 2002), pp. 29–33.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, 'Telegramma polnomočnogo predstavitelja SSSR v Velikobritanii I.M. Majskogo narodnomu komissaru inostrannych del SSSR V. M. Molotovu, 27 nojabrja 1939', in *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR*, 1939, II, pp. 340–42; 'Telegramma polnomočnogo predstavitelja SSSR v SSHA K.A. Umanskogo v Narodnyj komissariat inostrannych del SSSR, 30 nojabrja 1939', *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR*, 1939, II, pp. 353–54; 'Telegramma polnomočnogo predstavitelja SSSR v SSHA K. A. Umanskogo v Narodnyj komissariat inostrannych del SSSR, 2 dekabrija 1939', in *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR*, 1939, II, pp. 359–60. See also van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland* 1939–40, pp. 26–27.

emphasized that “the Soviet Union is not in a state of war with Finland and does not threaten the Finnish people with war” (basing his claim on the diplomatic relations with “the People’s Revolutionary Government of Finland”); therefore, according to him, the Finnish diplomat Rudolf Holsti’s attempt to hold the Soviet Union accountable for the attack on Finland was groundless.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, I will look into more recent interpretations of this issue in Russian media in the context of attempts to control representations of history concerning the decisions and activities of the Soviet Union and the Red Army during the Second World War. Finally, I will briefly consider the case of the Mainila shelling in the context of Russian military doctrine, propaganda, and information warfare.

## PREPARING THE GROUND FOR WAR

The early Soviet regime relied on getting its message through to the common consciousness. At first, activities aimed at consolidating Soviet ideology amongst the people and mobilizing them to work for it were called agitation. However, this later developed into propaganda which was distributed openly in diverse forms. During the 1930s, Soviet propaganda took a new turn: stories of contemporary heroes on one hand and sheer patriotism on the other became the basis of the new mass culture.<sup>11</sup> This setting was a fine foundation for war propaganda, even though, in early autumn 1939, the Soviet newspapers reported something else: a military nonaggression pact with Hitler’s Germany. However, tensions were simultaneously growing between the Soviet Union and Finland, and the image of Finland as a vicious and reactionary nation was being reinforced in Soviet media.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently, as Väinö Tanner, the foreign minister of Finland in 1939–40, admits in hindsight in his memoirs, the Finnish politicians had not quite grasped the political significance of Soviet propaganda, thus underestimating and misreading the increasing and intensifying denigration of Finland and its government in Soviet media preceding the Mainila incident. Instead of understanding that the message was primarily aimed at the Soviet audience in order to justify the upcoming war, Finnish politicians considered it as a means to pressure Finland to agree with the demands of the Soviet

<sup>10</sup> ‘Telegramma narodnogo komissara inostrannych del SSSR V.M. Molotova general’nomu sekretarju Ligi nacij Ž. Avenolju, 4 dekabrya 1939’, in *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR, 1939*, II, pp. 364–65.

<sup>11</sup> Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda During World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 2–4, 7–9.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Edwards, *The Winter War*, pp. 98–99.

Union.<sup>13</sup> The coverage given to the "provocation" between 27 and 30 November in the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* indeed indicates the importance of the issue to Soviet propagandists; it was presented as an acute matter concerning the whole Soviet nation, and the first and second pages of these issues were dedicated to it (in general, from the 1930s onwards, Soviet newspapers concentrated on providing building blocks for Soviet identity, and any news of what was going on in other parts of the world was printed on the fifth page).<sup>14</sup>

On 27 November, the day following the alleged incident, both *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* were already reporting it at full blast. *Pravda* published the headline "Impudent provocation by Finnish warmongers", while *Izvestiia*'s main headline concerning the issue was "The Soviet people are angered by the impudent provocation by Finnish warmongers". Both newspapers published a short description of how seven artillery shots had been unexpectedly fired from the Finnish side on a Soviet unit near the village of Mainila. Four had died, according to the newspaper, and nine wounded. Colonel Tikhomirov had been called upon to carry out an investigation at the site. The provocation had caused deep anger amongst the locals, the newspaper concluded.<sup>15</sup>

In both *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, the whole text of Molotov's first note to the Finnish government was published, which is a clear indication of the dual purpose of the notes related to the incident: in addition to international communication, they were aimed at preparing public opinion for actual military operations and mobilization.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the Mainila shelling, the "provocation" was indeed immediately used to stir up an angry response amongst the people. What is interesting is that on 27 November, only a day after the alleged incident, the newspapers were already full of reports of workers' meetings and interviews on the issue all over the country, which indeed suggests that a propaganda plan utilizing a "provocation" had already existed well before 26 November, perhaps created by Zhdanov (how the readers interpreted this almost real-time reportage remains unknown).<sup>17</sup>

Numerous alleged announcements by diverse collectives and interviews with Soviet workers from various factories were published in Soviet newspapers. All of these texts were quite homogenic and rhetorically very similar, so summarizing them systematically one by one is not practical for our purpose; instead, some examples will give an adequate idea

<sup>13</sup> Tanner, *Olin ulkoministerinä talvisodan aikana*, pp. 114, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Pravda*, 27 November 1939, p. 2; *Izvestija*, 27 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Manninen, *Stalinin kiusa – Himmlerin täi*, p. 30.

of the rhetoric and style. For instance, in *Pravda*, Comrade Egorov from a car factory in Moscow was reported as saying: "Our answer is simple and clear: if the overreactive 'knaves' [voiaki, a word often used to refer to Finnish soldiers in these articles] do not stop, our Red Army will deliver them a true counterpunch. We will not forgive them shedding the blood of our beloved soldiers and commanders".<sup>18</sup> An announcement from workers of the same factory reflected the mood the Soviet government wanted to spread: "Down with the warmongers! We all, as one, will defend the socialist fatherland".<sup>19</sup>

*Izvestiia* was flooded with similar announcements. For instance, in a text titled "Finnish warmongers are playing a dangerous game", Comrade Nefesov from another factory in Moscow was reported to have said that "the peaceful politics of the Soviet administration are known all over the world", but any border violations would have consequences:

We accept the demand of the Soviet administration that Finnish troops have to be removed from the border. If needed, by the call of the Party and the administration, we are ready at any minute to protect our beloved native country.<sup>20</sup>

Besides this message, which was repeated in all the announcements by the workers, it was pointed out, for instance, that the Finnish government was incompetent, "had lost its mind", and that the ministers were mere marionets who had been paid to arrange the provocation, while the Finnish peasants and workers did not want a war.<sup>21</sup>

Similar articles, interviews and announcements were published on 28 November. In both newspapers, two crammed pages were dedicated to the "provocation". The main headline on the first page of *Pravda* announced that "The note by the Soviet administration is widely supported by the whole nation", while the second page declared "The provocation of Finnish warmongers aroused the anger and indignation of the whole Soviet people".<sup>22</sup> *Izvestiia*'s main headlines were, respectively, "The anger of Soviet people grows" and "The workers single-mindedly demand a comprehensive reply to presumptuous Finnish warmongers".<sup>23</sup> The other headlines in the newspapers declared, for instance, "The terrible anger of Soviet people", "Let the adventurers blame themselves", "There is a limit to patience", "Look out, marionets", "Restrain the arrogant provocateurs", "Starters of

<sup>18</sup> *Pravda*, 27 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Izvestiia*, 27 November 1939, p.2.

<sup>21</sup> *Pravda*, 27 November 1939, p. 2; see also *Izvestiia*, 27 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Pravda*, 28 November 1939, pp. 1–2.

<sup>23</sup> *Izvestiia*, 28 November 1939, pp. 1–2.

war end up badly" and "Stop the rampage of the bandits!"<sup>24</sup> Some articles already referred to actual military activities as a response to the alleged provocation, informing, for instance, that "The Baltic fleet of the Red Army is ready to crush the enemy".<sup>25</sup> In *Izvestija*, Comrade Petrushenko, a soldier working at the border, was reported to have said that "We accept comprehensive action by the Soviet administration and assure our readiness to once again show the power of Soviet weapons".<sup>26</sup>

The collective hubris and aggression was reported to be getting stronger: "The pitiful leaders of Finland forgot that the Soviet border is sacred and inviolable. The ridiculous fools of the Finnish administration did not learn any lessons from the sad experiences of Polish landlords", Comrade Sorokin from the "Elektrosila" factory was reported to have said.<sup>27</sup> Workers of another factory announced:

We do not want war, but we are ready for war. The peaceable work of the great Soviet nation is protected by our mighty, invincible Red Army, which is by any minute ready to wipe the warmongers from the face of the earth.<sup>28</sup>

The other interviewees reminded readers that the "Finnish knaves" had forgotten that the Soviet people can "destroy them, crush them like bugs".<sup>29</sup> Finnish leaders were repeatedly called warmongers and accused of imperialism, playing with fire, and humouring their "Western European masters"; they were reminded that the Finnish people do not support them.<sup>30</sup>

On 29 November, both newspapers published the reply to the first Soviet note from the Finnish government – in which the involvement of the Finnish troops was denied and negotiations called for – as well as Molotov's reply, dated 28 November, which was mentioned in the "Introduction" of this article.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that the Finnish government's polite and somewhat level-headed reply was published together with Molotov's reaction that blamed it for reflecting deep hatred towards the Soviet Union; so, apparently, the publishers had confidence in their readers' ability to interpret the Finnish representation of the matter in the "proper" light after exposure to long-term propaganda concerning the Finnish government and its relations with the Soviet Union.

<sup>24</sup> *Pravda*, 28 November 1939, pp. 1–2; *Izvestija*, 28 November 1939, pp. 1–2.

<sup>25</sup> *Pravda*, 28 November 1939, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Izvestija*, 28 November 1939, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Pravda*, 28 November 1939, pp. 1–2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>31</sup> *Pravda*, 29 November 1939, p. 1; *Izvestija*, 29 November 1939, p. 1.

Two pages in both newspapers were dedicated once again to announcements by diverse collectives, the main headline in *Pravda* announcing: "Solid demand of the Soviet people: give a crushing and destructive blow to the Finnish warmongers!"<sup>32</sup> In *Izvestiia* it was announced that "The false and ruthless note from the Finnish administration aroused an explosion of anger and fury in the Soviet people".<sup>33</sup> Now the tone was even more aggressive than in the articles published in the previous days, emphasizing imagery of the enemy with headlines such as "The Red Army will destroy the overreaching bandits", "Wipe the Finnish adventurers off the earth", "Rabid dogs will be destroyed", "Destroy the disgusting gang" and "Woe to those who arouse the rage of the Soviet people!"<sup>34</sup>

Finns were threatened by the wrath of the Soviet people in numerous ways and also ridiculed: "Clowns dressed in uniforms of knaves are larking at our borders. The pitiful dwarves, they suggest that the great Socialist country would withdraw the troops of the glorious Red Army and expose the route to Lenin's city".<sup>35</sup> Once again, the "West" in the background was brought out; for instance, Comrade Kazantsev, a worker from a factory in Moscow, was reported as saying:

We were too lenient with Finland. How many times has the Soviet Union patiently and persistently suggested to the headstrong Finnish leaders: "Let us live in peace and harmony". The Finnish political gamblers, encouraged by the West, shouted like cockfighters: "no, we do not want to!"<sup>36</sup>

Also, there was a piece of fresh news entitled "New provocations by Finnish warmongers", describing how a Russian patrol had been fired on near the border on 28 November by a group of Finnish soldiers, three of whom ended up captives when more Russians arrived for assistance. Shots were reported to have been fired from the Finnish side towards Russia on two separate occasions, the second being followed by an attempt by Finnish soldiers to cross the border to the Russian side.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Pravda*, 29 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Izvestija*, 29 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Pravda*, 29 November 1939, p. 2; *Izvestija*, 29 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Izvestija*, 29 November 1939, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Pravda*, 29 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1, see also *Izvestija*, 29 November 1939, p. 1.

## JUSTIFICATION FOR THE WAR

On 30 November, the newspapers published Molotov's radio address from the previous day. In the address he blamed the Finnish government for "indulging in revolting provocations" and having "an uncompromising and hostile attitude" that was backed by "foreign imperialists who stir up hatred against the Soviet Union". According to Molotov, the Finnish government had shown its inability to "maintain normal relations" and, despite the suspicions expressed in the hostile foreign press, the Soviet Union had never cherished any intentions to annex Finnish territory, claiming anything else was "malicious slander". As nothing was expected from the Finnish government but "fresh insolent provocation", the Soviet Government considered itself released from the Treaty of Non-aggression, which had been "irresponsibly violated by the Finnish government". Also, Soviet diplomats residing in Finland were recalled.<sup>38</sup>

However – as there was no official declaration of war – the other texts continued with the same style as in the issues of the preceding days; however, there were less of them now. Apparently, it was considered that the reportage on Mainila incident had served its propagandistic purpose for preparing the people for the upcoming military conflict. The rhetoric, once again, emphasized that the Soviet administration represented the "voice of the whole nation", that the fury expressed by the people was righteous and even "sacred" (as were the borders of the Soviet Union), and that the army was in full readiness to protect the nation.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the newspapers kept on emphasizing the essential "otherness" of the enemy; for instance, in *Pravda* there was a title "Finnish pigs must not push their snouts into the Soviet garden".<sup>40</sup>

*Pravda* also published a short article describing the atmosphere in Helsinki, describing the increased military activity in the city and the "anti-Soviet" tone of the newspapers. "In the spirit of the note from the Finnish government, [they] distort all the facts". Also, there was a note on how German newspapers had reported on the "provocation by Finnish warmongers". It was noted that the German press considered the interests of the Soviet Union completely natural and stated that Finland had refused to cooperate with the Soviet Union due to its policy of neutrality. "But here the deceitfulness of the government of Finland could already be seen, as the agreement on cooperation would not have required abandoning the policy of neutrality if that policy had not been used against

<sup>38</sup> *Pravda*, 30 November 1939, p. 1; *Izvestija*, 30 November 1939, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Pravda*, 30 November 1939, pp. 1–2; *Izvestija*, 30 November 1939, pp. 1–2.

<sup>40</sup> *Pravda*, 30 November 1939, p. 2.

the Soviet Union".<sup>41</sup> These statements were aligned with the contemporary political situation between Germany and the Soviet Union, which was sealed for the time being with the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact. Even though the actual threat to the Soviet Union was Germany, this was not explicitly mentioned; also, in *Pravda*'s articles the faceless operator of "marionets" – that is, the Finnish leaders – was generalized as the capitalist and imperialist "West".

To sum everything up, several purposes for the dire representation of the "provocation" and the alleged response in the profoundly propagandistic Soviet newspapers can be detected:

1. The widespread publication of news articles regarding the staged incident together with the preceding propaganda concerning Finland provided a proper excuse to start a war because, according to the orthodox socialist world view, aggressive and imperialistic war-waging was out of the question. Presenting the incident as an unquestionable threat aimed at the Soviet people and nation – and especially Leningrad – was the *casus belli* that was needed for action.
2. Emphasizing the workers' response underlined and boosted the collective nature of the upcoming military efforts: essentially, it was the Soviet people as a whole which was threatened by Finland, and the same people as a collective was represented as willing to defend itself and its native country. This attempted mobilization of the people is in line with the war propaganda in Soviet newspapers from 1941 onwards.<sup>42</sup> In light of Soviet protocol, it was crucial that the people was represented as giving its full approval to any action the Soviet administration considered necessary, including military interventions. Bringing forth the alleged unity of the Soviet administration and people also created a contrast to how Finland was represented: its reckless leaders waging war and ignoring the people's interests, and foreign states meddling in the issues of the country in the background. This juxtaposition of order against chaos, unity against disunity, was an effective propagandistic and rhetorical tool.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, pp. 9–12.

3. The newspapers were effectively spreading enemy imagery against Finns or, more precisely, against the Finnish government and army, as the Soviet Union wanted to present itself as an ally for the Finnish working people. The dualistic representation of "us" – in this case, the Soviet people, administration and army – in an exclusively positive light and the labelling of "them" with pejorative names and attributes, even denying their humanity, is a typical tool for persuading masses to agree to and participate in a conflict that is perceived, ultimately, as one between good and evil. In the case of reporting the alleged provocation, Finns were called, for instance, warmongers, bandits, criminals, knaves, marionets, clowns, dogs and pigs.<sup>43</sup>

The imagery was also consolidated in pictorial form. In *Pravda*, Finland was represented in political caricatures on the fifth page. A cartoon on 27 November was called "Dangerous game" and depicted the Finnish prime minister as a jester with pictures of Russian emperors hanging on his neck, juggling with bombs and torches and balancing on an exhausted figure labelled "Finances".<sup>44</sup> On 28 November, a cartoon depicted a dog barking at a tank which had a "USSR" label on it, encouraged by headless figures labelled as "provocateurs of war". The text above reminded the reader that the fate of Finnish leaders would be as miserable as that of Polish ones.<sup>45</sup> On 29 November, there was a picture of a dumb-looking soldier jumping on artillery and waving weapons, while in the front of him there was a fellow in tails and a top hat – apparently representing the Finnish government – waving a note announcing that there was no artillery near the border.<sup>46</sup> In the cartoon published on 30 November, a nasty-looking figure bursts through a document entitled "Non-aggression pact between USSR and Finland" and tries to grab Leningrad. A pair of hands with a rifle prepares to prevent it: "We will slap [them] on the hands!"<sup>47</sup>

In the context of the reportage of the "provocation", it was predictable that on 1 December the Soviet Union's attack against Finland in the Karelian isthmus was also represented as the Red Army's defence operation against hostilities by Finnish soldiers (when it comes to how the events

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, Marja Vuorinen, *Enemy Images in War Propaganda* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), pp. 3–5; Vilho Harle, 'On the Concepts of the "Other" and the "Enemy"', *History of European Ideas*, 19 (1994), 27–34.

<sup>44</sup> *Pravda*, 27 November 1939, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Pravda*, 28 November 1939, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Pravda*, 29 November 1939, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> *Pravda*, 30 November 1939, p. 5.

were presented to the Soviet soldiers who had been sent to crush the Finnish army, it was mentioned that their task was to "liberate" the Finnish people from their government, landowners and capitalists).<sup>48</sup> It was noted that the airfields in Viborg and Helsinki had been bombed by the Soviet air force and that the president of Finland had announced that Finland was at war with the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup>

## THE MAINILA CASE UNDER RE-SCRUTINY

All nations tend to cherish their national narratives, but Russian history has been valued exceptionally highly in the twenty-first century. The contemporary regime has embraced not only the idea of the significance of a national historical narrative in attempts to create and maintain cohesion, but also the importance of controlling representations of the past. Especially the Second World War – or the Great Patriotic War, as it is called in Russia, referring to 1941–44 and omitting the collusion between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939–41 – has been fully utilized in order to create idealized imagery of Russia heroically defending all of Europe against fascism, and the soldiers of the Red Army sacrificing themselves for the common good. This development towards a fully state-controlled past has fiercely resisted any counternarratives, for instance, by Eastern European countries which suffered the invasion, occupation, and other activities of the Red Army and the Soviet Union. These counternarratives, and basically any attempt to present the Red Army in anything but a positive light, have been proclaimed "falsification" of history by the Russian administration. Also, there has been a project to unify school textbooks to ensure that pupils are taught the "right" version of historical events.<sup>50</sup> Simultaneously, the disturbing features of the Stalinist period that do not match the cohesive national narrative have been whitewashed by, for

<sup>48</sup> *Pravda*, 1 December 1939; p. 1. van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland 1939–40*, p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> *Pravda*, 1 December 1939, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Veera Laine, 'New Generation of Victors: Narrating the Nation in Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019', *Demokratizatsiya*, 28:4 (2020), 517–40; Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules – What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Washington: Chatham House, 2019), pp. 105, 119–24; Gregory Carleton, *Russia – The Story of War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 80–113; Kati Parppai, "'A thousand years of history': References to the past in the addresses to the Federal Assembly by the president of Russia, 2000–19', in *Medievalism in Finland and Russia*, ed. by Reima Välimäki (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 39–56; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, *Falsification of History as a Tool of Influence*, ed. by Amanda Rivkin, Anne Geisow, and Marius Varna (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020), <[https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/abuse\\_of\\_history\\_report\\_27-01-2020\\_reduced\\_file\\_size.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/abuse_of_history_report_27-01-2020_reduced_file_size.pdf)> [accessed 26 August 2022].

instance, directing the attention of Russians to external enemies rather than the internal terror.<sup>51</sup>

This revisionism is also the context in which the shelling of Mainila was re-scrutinized in the Russian media scene. The idea of the Soviet Union staging a provocation in order to justify an attack on a neighbouring country apparently did not fit in the martyrdom-toned, profoundly dualistic popular imagery of the Great Patriotic War which was being formed and maintained. Also, by bringing forth the hypothesis that the Soviet Union had indeed been a victim of hostile scheming in 1939, it was possible to downplay the awkward and disturbing fact that the Soviet Union had actually made an agreement with Nazi Germany.

In January 2018, the Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergei Lavrov, suggested founding a Finnish-Russian historical committee to investigate certain "controversial" historical issues, one of which, according to him, was the beginning of the Winter War. This suggestion was in response to a question asked by a Russian journalist at a press conference regarding whether the shelling of Mainila had been perpetrated by Finland or the Soviet Union (the journalist pointed out that views with which Finnish historians disagreed had recently been presented on the issue). Lavrov also said that historians should resolve such matters. In response to Lavrov's suggestion concerning the founding of a joint committee, the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, briefly replied that the question of the shelling of Mainila had already been adequately examined by both Finnish and Russian historians.<sup>52</sup>

By the time of Lavrov's suggestion, the generally accepted view of the shelling as a false-flag operation by the Soviet Union had indeed been questioned or challenged by several writers on internet platforms, some of which had connections to the administration. Some of them simply presented the issue of Mainila as an open question. For instance, in the "official" history portal in Russia, maintained by the state-supported Russian Military Historical Society, an article "the Soviet-Finnish War" was published on 15 December 2015. The authors, I.S. Rat'kovskii and M.V. Kholodakov, presented the shelling as an unsolved question:

<sup>51</sup> One example of this whitewashing is the case of the Sandarmokh mass graves in Russian Karelia. In 1937–1938, over 9000 victims of Stalinist terror, of more than 58 nationalities, were buried in the area. From 1996 onwards, the Memorial Society worked on identifying the victims. In 2016, a Russian historian, supported by the Russian Military Historical Society, began to promote a new "theory" of Soviet prisoners of war, killed by Finns, having been buried in Sandarmokh (see, for instance, Anna Yarovaya, 'Rewriting Sandarmokh,' *The Russian Reader*, 29 December 2017, <<https://therussianreader.com/2017/12/29/anna-yarovaya-rewriting-sandarmokh/>> [accessed 28 August 2022]; see also Kati Parppai, 'Case study: Finland', in *Falsification of History as a Tool of Influence*, pp. 34–41).

<sup>52</sup> 'Prezident Niinistö: vystrely v Majnila uze izuchený', YLE News in Russian, 15 January 2018, <[https://yle.fi/utiset/osasto/novosti/prezident\\_niiniste\\_vystrely\\_v\\_mainila\\_uzhe\\_izucheny/10024386](https://yle.fi/utiset/osasto/novosti/prezident_niiniste_vystrely_v_mainila_uzhe_izucheny/10024386)> [accessed 28 August 2019].

Disputes regarding whose side the shots were fired from continue. In 1939, the Finns tried to prove that the shelling could not have been carried out from their territory, and the whole story of the "Mainila incident" was nothing more than a provocation from Moscow.<sup>53</sup>

However, some writers took their hypotheses further than that. Another article on the same site by Ivan Zatsarin, published on 26 November 2016, was entitled "How to stubbornly stir up trouble. For the anniversary of the Mainila incident". It had a suggestive tone, aiming to draw parallels to contemporary political conflicts. The article began with quotes from British scholars, describing the tense position of Eastern European countries in relation to Russia, and the author continued by explaining how these countries actually brought the misfortune on themselves by considering Russia a hostile neighbour: "we should discuss the fact that if you continue crying 'wolf' for a long time, the wolf will come. But it is not his fault". He continues by explaining that two versions exist of what happened in Mainila and reminds the reader that Finland gained independence because of Russia, which had granted it lots of privileges in the nineteenth century (the author points out that the situation was similar in "Malorossiia"), thus creating an optimal foundation for independence, formalized by the Bolsheviks on 4 January 1918.<sup>54</sup>

After that, according to the author, Finland took Poland's route: invading Karelia, raiding other territories, and making a general military nuisance of itself to Russia. "In other words, Finland, which in November 1939 suddenly shelled the territory of the Soviet Union, was nothing extraordinary. Shellings with small arms had taken place several times". Further, the author explains, the reason for this courage was simple: the patronage of other countries, first Britain, then Japan, and finally Germany.<sup>55</sup> In 1939, Finland refused to move the border in the area of Vyborg (interestingly, the author chooses to call it "Crimea") and, according to the author, either side could have performed the shelling. More important for him is, however, that the Soviet-Finnish war can be compared to the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 or "the return of Crimea to Russia" in the sense that "both of these events are today used as evidence of Russia's incredible aggressiveness"

<sup>53</sup> Il'ja Rat'kovskij and Michail Chodjakov, 'Sovetsko-finskaja vojna', *Istorija.rj*, 15 December 2015, <<https://histrf.ru/read/articles/sovietsko-finskaia-voina-event>> [accessed 18 August 2022].

<sup>54</sup> Ivan Zazarin, 'Kak upriamo budit' licho. K godovščine Majnil'skogo incidenta', *Istorija.rj*, 26 November 2016, <<https://histrf.ru/read/articles/kak-upriamo-budit-likhо-k-77-lietiiu-mainilskogho-intsidenta>> [accessed 18 August 2022].

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

and an excuse to hunt down Moscow's agents and ask NATO for weapons and reinforcements.<sup>56</sup>

The author concluded by pointing out that as Poland and Finland from the 1920s onwards had aimed to "curse, threaten, intimidate and hunt down 'agents of Moscow'", these "current victims and candidates for victims" are erroneously doing the same. He sarcastically pointed out that they aim to unite to create "a sanitary frontier by the border of barbaric Russia" and those countries "that do not participate in such projects have no problems with the inviolability of their borders".<sup>57</sup>

An article by Leonid Maslovskii that was published in July 2017 on the *Zvezda*-channel website – run by the Russian Ministry of Defence – concentrated on historical issues, presenting yet another theory concerning the Mainila incident. The article, entitled "The shame of Dunkirk: how Europe eagerly bowed to Hitler", claimed that Finland had started the war, aiming to test the Red Army on behalf of the German forces after Finland had rejected the Soviet Union's proposition to move its border in exchange for an area of land twice as large: "Finland refused and reacted with a military provocation that had strong support from Germany and fellow warmongers".<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the shelling of Mainila, according to Maslovskii, was linked to the alleged general resentment and opportunistic attitude of the "West" towards the Soviet Union, the whole war having been a test of the Soviet Union's Western forces:

After the Finns encircled and defeated our 44th Infantry Division, W. Churchill stated in a radio appearance on 20 January 1944 that Finland "revealed to the world the weakness of the Red Army". This statement was made in order to accelerate Germany's attack on the Soviet Union. The whole policy of the West was aimed at achieving one goal: an attack by Germany on the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Leonid Maslovskij, 'Pozor Djunkerka: kak Evropa s gotovnost'ju preklonilas' pered Hitlerom', *Zvezda*, 31 July 2017, <<https://tvzvezda.ru/news/qhistory/content/201707310904-1vri.htm>> [accessed 17 August 2022].

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

It was also announced by the author that any suggestion that the Soviet forces would anyhow have been defeated by the Finnish in the Winter War was a falsification of history.<sup>60</sup>

Finland is linked to the military aspirations of the "West" in some other writings, too. For instance, in December 2017, a site called *Politics and War*<sup>61</sup> published an article called "Mainila, what really happened", by B. Rozhin. The author refers to documents (not properly cited) and claims that they contain evidence that Finland was to blame for this event.

According to Rozhin, other sabotage attempts by Finnish soldiers dressed as border guards took place in the Soviet Union at around the time of the shelling. He says that the reason for this was to provoke the Soviet Union to start a war in which the "West" would provide support to Finland; he asks why the Finnish government would behave "to put it mildly: unwisely" and comments that "the answer is self-evident: it is because they were promised serious support from the West in the case of war with the Soviet Union!"<sup>62</sup> He continues by explaining that it was necessary to present the Soviet Union as a warmonger to justify the intervention: "And so we come to understand that Finland was suddenly very interested in an event that would push the Soviet Union to take action".<sup>63</sup>

The author also mentioned that Tsar Alexander I had made a mistake by joining the province of Vyborg with Finland in 1812, and that the nationalistic zeal of the Finns had been high prior to the war. He concludes his text as follows:

The lesson was learned by Finnish society and a high price was paid for the realization of its real place in the world. Only in getting rid of the ulcer of nationalism did Finland manage to build amicable relations with its great neighbour.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. Maslovskii's article in *Zvezda* was noted by Finnish journalist Arja Paaninen, specialised in Russia, who wrote an article about it in the Finnish tabloid *Ilt-Sanomat* on 1 August 2017: 'Russian TV channel distorts history: "Finland executed the shelling of Mainila and, through military provocation, started the Winter War as an ally with Germany"'. In her article, Paaninen also recalls her recent conversation with a Russian navy officer, who was worried about the resurrection of fascism and Nazism in Europe and emphasised that Russia had never been the aggressor in military conflicts. Paaninen contextualised both of the issues in Russian information warfare, which aims to emphasise the threat posed by Europe (Arja Paaninen, 'Venäläisen tv-kanava väristelee historiää: 'Suomi ampui Mainilan laukaukset ja provosoili talvisodan Saksan apurina', *Ilt-Sanomat*, 1 August 2017, <<https://www.is.fi/ulkomaat/2000005309849.html>> [accessed 26 August 2022]).

<sup>61</sup> The site seems to be run by several individuals, who proclaim their goals to be, for instance, to "advance a reasonable civil society" in Russia, and to "preserve and strengthen the independence and sovereignty, as well as the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, as well as the spiritual and material development of the country's population". The authors emphasise that "the main priority for us is to counter the processes of colour revolutions in Russia initiated by external intervention, as well as the processes of new restructuring ('perestroika-2'), related to the struggle between the Kremlin clans" ('Manifest', *Politwar.ru*, <<http://politwar.ru/manifest>> [accessed 26 August 2022]).

<sup>62</sup> Boris Rozhin, 'Majnila, kak eto bylo na samom dele'. This text used to be available on the site of *Politika & Vojna* (December 2017), but it has been removed; however, it can be found in Rozhin's personal blog, *LiveJournal*, 3 December 2017, <<https://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/3849481.html>> [accessed 28 April 2023].

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

In both cases, the authors explicitly emphasize the role of Finland as a pawn in a game played by the "West", thus repeating the claims of Soviet propaganda in 1939. In Rozhin's article, this role is explicitly linked to the unrealistic nationalistic aspirations of Finns.

Only on some occasions was the shelling of Mainila mentioned in the state media. For instance, on 26 November 2019 – on the anniversary of the event – the news site *Gazeta.ru* published an article "Shots in Mainila: who started the war between the USSR and Finland?". This article was written by Dmitrii Okunev and it represented this issue as controversial. It presented Finnish nationalism and hostile attitudes towards the Soviet Union, together with the restlessness of the border area, as the primary reason for the Soviet leadership wanting to move the border; the fear of an attack by Germany was mentioned only as a secondary reason. As for which side was responsible of the incident, the author mentions that many researchers now agree that it was a well-planned provocation of the Soviet command with the intention of justifying the subsequent invasion of Finland by the Red Army; he also says that the "pro-Western" version, which represented the shelling as the work of NKVD, was based on secondary sources. The author also cites journalist Arja Paananen (see note 58) in describing the significance of the event to Finns. He concluded the article by noting that the war, which lasted far longer than expected, had dispelled the myth of the power of the Red Army, the losses of the Soviet Union exceeding those of Finland.<sup>65</sup>

#### AMBIGUITY, MIRRORING AND "THE DOCTRINE OF INNOCENCE"

What is the "legacy" of the shelling of Mainila and how does it relate to the military activities and propagandistic strategies of contemporary Russia? Of course, one always has to be cautious in drawing parallels between historical and contemporary events, approaches, and ideas. However, in this case prudent comparison can be said to be justified because post-Soviet Russia "inherited" certain propaganda strategies – also, we could say, the whole notion of the importance of propaganda and the idea of active involvement in information warfare – from the Soviet Union and has

<sup>65</sup> Dmitrij Okunev, 'Vystrely v Majnile: kto načal vojnu SSSR s Finländiejj', *Gazeta.ru*, 26 November 2019, <[https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2019/11/26\\_a\\_12831998.shtml?updated](https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2019/11/26_a_12831998.shtml?updated)> [accessed 26 August 2022]. Some dispute arose on social media due to the anniversary; on 30 November 2019, a state-run "Museum of Victory" tweeted that the Winter War broke out due to Finns firing at Soviet stations. The Finnish Reservists' Association made a statement on the issue. The museum replied by apologizing and saying the tweet had been misinterpreted ('Finnish Reservists' Association slams false Russian interpretation of Winter War', *YLE News*, 7 December 2019, <<https://yle.fi/news/3-11197504>> [accessed 26 August 2022]).

applied them in the modern media environment in domestic communication as well as in international circles.<sup>66</sup>

The Mainila incident has become a classic example in the media of a false-flag operation, together with another 1939 case, namely the so-called Gliwice (Gleiwitz) incident on 1 September 1939, when German forces invaded Poland using a staged "Polish provocation" in this Silesian border town as an excuse.<sup>67</sup> The Mainila shelling has been brought up especially in the context of Russia's invasions of and interventions in its neighbouring countries (which is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the counternarratives described in the previous section have been produced).<sup>68</sup> It has been referred to, for instance, by Ukrainian representatives in the United Nations Security Council. At the meeting on 26 November 2018, the Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations, Volodymyr Yelchenko, compared the Kerch Strait incident to the event that started the Winter War in 1939 and which ultimately led to the expelling of the Soviet Union from the League of Nations.<sup>69</sup> On 31 January 2022, less than a month before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the United Nations Security Council held a meeting on the question of Russia concentrating troops near the border. The representative of Ukraine, Sergiy Kyslytsya, pointed out that "we are well aware of Russia's history of ploys and provocations, and we will do everything possible to prevent another Mainila-type provocation by Russia".<sup>70</sup>

On the doctrinal level, historical as well as contemporary false-flag operations can be said to represent or perhaps overlap with the strategy of ambiguity or deception (*maskirovka*) that is practiced by Russia, and by the Soviet Union preceding it.<sup>71</sup> A prominent example is the war in Georgia in 2008 and Russia's preparations for it. By constantly provoking and pressuring Georgia, Russia aimed to tempt it to react militarily in order to convince the international community that its operation was justi-

<sup>66</sup> Sinikukka Saari, 'Russia's Post-Orange Revolution Strategies to Increase its Influence in Former Soviet Republics: Public Diplomacy *po russkii*', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66 (2014), 50–66; Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money* (New York: Institute of Modern Russia, 2014), pp. 8–9; Katri Pyynöniemi, 'Introduction', in *Fog of Falsehood – Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*, ed. by Katri Pyynöniemi and András Rácz (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2016), pp. 13–15.

<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, Richard C. Hall, 'Renewed War', in *Consumed by War: European Conflict in the 20th Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), pp. 119–36 (here: 119).

<sup>68</sup> See, for instance, 'False flags: What are they and when have they been used?', BBC News, 18 February 2022, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60434579>> [accessed 26 August 2022].

<sup>69</sup> The Kerch Strait incident refers to events on 25 November 2018, when three Ukrainian naval vessels attempting to transit from the Black Sea to the Azov Sea were fired on by the Russian coastguard. See Björn Ottosson, UN Security Council Emergency Meeting on Russia Ukraine Tensions, Nov 26 2018, online video recording, YouTube, 27 November 2018, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Pf\\_aTPOM3A/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Pf_aTPOM3A/)> [accessed 28 August 2022].

<sup>70</sup> Meetings coverage 'Situation along Russian Federation-Ukraine Border Can Only Be Resolved through Diplomacy, Political Affairs Chief Tells Security Council', United Nations Security Council, 31 January 2022, <<https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14783.doc.htm>> [accessed 24 August 2022].

<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, Charles J. Dick, 'Catching NATO Unawares: Soviet Army Surprise and Deception Techniques', in *The Art and Science of Military Deception*, ed. by Hy Rothstein and Barton Whaley (Norwood: Artech House, 2013), pp. 181–92; Douglas Mastriano, 'Putin – the masked nemesis of the strategy of ambiguity', *Defence & Security Analysis*, 33:1 (2017), pp. 68–76.

fied as a peacekeeping mission in the context of its alleged "Responsibility to Protect".<sup>72</sup> The annexation of Crimea and the war in East Ukraine were carried out utilizing strategies of deception and misinformation; in the case of the escalation of the war in February 2022, when Russia staged a full-scale invasion, the official Russian propaganda followed familiar lines by emphasizing the nature of this "special operation" as a reactive one that was a consequence of the alleged distress of the Russian-speaking population in East Ukraine (the ideas of "denazification" were intended to resonate primarily with the domestic audience in Russia).<sup>73</sup>

The military doctrine of deception is seamlessly intertwined with that of disinformation and the constant and multifaceted information war waged by Russia internally as well as abroad.<sup>74</sup> Obviously, the media of the 1930s and the twenty-first century cannot be compared as such, but certain common features can be found in Russian propaganda concerning the shelling of Mainila and, say, the ongoing war in Ukraine, despite the completely different media platforms that now exist. Blaming the adversary of "provocation" or a threat of some other sort when justifying intervention or invasion is the most prominent of these features. Provocation as a term derives from Soviet political language, originally referring to any critical voices, but it was later established to underline Russia's role as a victim instead of an aggressor in conflicts.<sup>75</sup>

Blaming others for provocations is a prime example of *accusation in a mirror*, "a rhetorical practice in which one falsely accuses one's enemies of conducting, plotting, or desiring to commit precisely the same transgressions that one plans to commit against them".<sup>76</sup> When the Soviet Union was secretly preparing for a war against Finland in November 1939, it consistently blamed the Finnish government for "warmongering" and plotting against its socialist neighbour. Similarly, contemporary Russia systematically denies any atrocities and transgressions in Ukraine – from war crimes to bombing civilians and risking a nuclear disaster – consistently blaming Ukraine for the same acts instead.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup> See, for instance, Roy Allison, 'Russia resurgent? Moscow's campaign to "coerce Georgia to peace"', *International Affairs*, 84:6 (2008), 1145–71; Juris Pupchenok and Eric James Seltzer, 'Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the "Near Abroad"', *Nationalities Papers*, 49:4 (2021), 757–75. See also Matti Nupponen, 'Harhauttaminen Venäjän sotilasoperaatioissa' (unpublished master's thesis, National Defence University of Finland, 2017), pp. 28–49.

<sup>73</sup> Pupchenok and Seltzer, 'Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the "Near Abroad"', pp. 757–75.

<sup>74</sup> For an overview, see, for instance, Peter Pomerantsev, 'The Kremlin's Information War', *Journal of Democracy*, 26:4 (2015), 40–50. See also *Fog of Falsehood*, ed. By Pynnöniemi and Rácz, *passim*.

<sup>75</sup> Katri Pynnöniemi, 'The Metanarratives of Russian Strategic Deception', in *Fog of Falsehood*, pp. 71–119 (p. 75).

<sup>76</sup> Kenneth L. Marcus, 'Accusation in a Mirror', *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal*, 43:2 (2012), 357–93.

<sup>77</sup> For recent examples of these tactics, see, for instance, the Twitter account of the Foreign Ministry of Russia, <[https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia)> [accessed 29 August 2022]. See also Andrej Sementkovskij, 'Istoriya fejkov I podelok: kto stal krestnym otcom gazetnyh utok iz Buči', *Istoriya.rj*, 5 April 2022, <<https://histrf.ru/read/articles/istoriya-feykov-i-podelok-kto-stal-krestnym-otcom-gazetnyh-utok-iz-buchi>> [accessed 29 August 2022].

Accusation in a mirror in Russian propaganda and rhetoric and Russia's systematic refusal to take any responsibility for its actions can actually be seen as a strategic application of a (profoundly imperialist) outlook I call "a doctrine of innocence". The perception of Russia as a victim of treacherous and self-interested Western Europe was being formulated in the nineteenth century, following the rise of nationalist and Slavist ideas, Russia's disappointment with the West following events such as Napoleon's invasion in 1812, and the Crimean war in 1853–56. Russia, for its part, was represented as a mere defender of its righteous interests in its geopolitical surroundings (and, for instance, in the case of Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, when Russia also represented itself as a defender of its oppressed Slavic brothers; here, we can actually see an early case of applying the ideas behind the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine, which was still forming at that time).<sup>78</sup> Further, as noted above, the Soviet Union presented itself as a socialist workers' realm devoted to peace, in contrast to capitalist and imperialist nations that were prone to conflicts and "anti-Soviet" representations of contemporary events. The rhetoric around the "provocation" in Mainila was a combination of "anti-Soviet" propaganda and the Soviet Union presenting itself as an innocent victim of warmongering on one hand, and threatening Finland with the invincible might of the Red Army on the other. The telegram to the League of Nations, emphasizing that the Soviet Union was not at war with Finland while it was bombing Finnish cities and localities (see above), is also quite a telling example, as is the idea of Soviet soldiers as "liberators" instead of invaders that was repeated frequently in the context of the Red Army in the Second World War.

Following the same doctrine, the idea of Russia never having attacked anyone, just being surrounded by "Russophobic" hostile forces and only reacting to provocations – for instance, by NATO – has recently been explicitly expressed by diverse actors in the context of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (also, the concept of Russian soldiers as "liberators" has been used).<sup>79</sup> Of course, in principle this outlook is universal: in all military conflicts, both sides consider their cause a righteous one, but

<sup>78</sup> Parppei, 'A thousand years of history', pp. 51–53. See also Kati Parppei, 'Enemy Images in the Russian National Narrative', in *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia – A Quest for Internal Cohesion*, ed. by Katri Pyynöniemi (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), pp. 23–47.

<sup>79</sup> See, for instance, Louis Jacobson, 'Russian spokesman's statement ignores centuries of Russian attacks', PolitFact, 21 February 2022, <<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2022/feb/21/dmitry-peskov/russian-spokesmans-statement-ignores-centuries-rus/>> [accessed 27 August 2022]; 'Kirill's provocative statement: Russia has never attacked anyone', Orthodox Times, 4 May 2022, <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/kirills-provocative-statement-russia-has-never-attacked-anyone/>> [accessed 27 August 2022]; see also President Rossi, 'Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nому Sobraniju', 1 December 2016, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/53379>> [accessed 27 August 2022]. For the use of the concept "liberator" in the context of Ukraine, see, for instance, Andrej Sementkovskij, 'Zabveniyu ne podlezhit. Istoki nasilija neonacistov nad voennoplennymi', *Istorija.rf*, 31 March 2022, <<https://histrf.ru/read/articles/zabveniyu-ne-podlezhit-istoki-nasiliya-neonacistov-nad-voennoplennymi>> [accessed 6 November 2022].

the contemporary regime in Russia has brought it out openly and consistently as a basis for its demands from the international community, simultaneously blaming others for not taking into account its legitimate interests, for acting in a provocative way, or for military destabilization. This rhetoric has sometimes been combined with Russia showing off its new armaments, reflecting a sense of Russian exceptionalism in the military context.<sup>80</sup>

The doctrine of innocence applied to contemporary purposes is intertwined with the recent and ongoing attempts to control representations of history, especially the Second World War, and to whitewash the decisions of the Soviet administration and the activities of the Red Army. Accusing other countries of falsifying history while presenting the "official" and state-controlled Russian historical narrative as the only acceptable one is also a form of accusation in a mirror. The "truth" as such can – perhaps paradoxically – be seen secondary in this game of rewriting history. As one of Russia's tactics in distributing misinformation is to create general confusion and mistrust, it might well be enough to bring forth optional hypotheses – as in the case of Mainila incident – with the hope that they will adequately resonate in the minds of the attempted audience, thus challenging the established perceptions and images for the benefit of Russia and its regime.<sup>81</sup> Thus, we can say that the echoes of the shelling of Mainila, with all their implications and layers of meanings, are still relevant today in several ways.

<sup>80</sup> See, for instance, Prezident Rossii, 'Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniju', 1 March 2018, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/56957>> [accessed 29 August 2022]. Carleton, *Russia – the Story of War*, passim.

<sup>81</sup> Pomerantsev, 'The Kremlin's Information War', pp. 40–50.

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